

15 Sept 2010

From Washington, two flights of nearly 7 hours each, separated by a 3-hour layover in Amsterdam.

Khartoum seems different - as if it is shedding some of its backwater oeuvre. More buildings going up. An odd tribute to President Bashir at a key intersection: something about the "protector of peace and prosperity" engraved on a massive faux granite slab. A gift from a campaign supporter. At another intersection, a huge sculpture of a hand giving the peace sign (I hope that's what it means.) The key roads seem no worse than DC's. There are even working traffic lights at a few intersections --and people actually stop for the red lights (that go yellow before they go green.) A new fleet of flashy green air-conditioned city buses (from China). New condo / apartment complexes with architectural layouts like something in Orange County, CA. Many large tracts of land clotted with debris and trash, and there are glimpses of people making a go of living under tarps between buildings.

I spent today on the usual first-day errands – changing money, buying phone cards, picking up flight tickets to El Fasher, buying white tobies for the teachers at the women's center, and tapes for the cassette player I will buy in El Fasher for the enjoyment of the Kassab weavers. Huda, Suliman's wife, who moved here with their son Awab a couple weeks ago in advance of Suliman's arrival, is a world-class haggler in the souk. She has been apartment hunting. Huda Bakheit, my translator in Darfur, is excited about our trip together. She is as clever a strategist as she is opinionated. I love that about her.

I'm finding the humor in all the little things that have to be temporarily re-learned: topping up the cell phone (they use SIM cards here and pay-as-you-go scratch cards to add calling time), remembering which way to turn the room key, turning on the heater for the shower, packing of all stuff needed for the day's activities, securing everything, carrying water, and learning more Arabic. Mohamed is handling his "caretaker" duties with regard to me with graceful efficiency.

I realized that if, in spite of my lists, I forget to do or procure something, I will still be able to accomplish a lot over the next couple of weeks.

17 Sept 2010 Khartoum

I couldn't sleep and I couldn't write last night. One of those existential alone-in-a foreign-place-conundrum times.

Am I in over my depth? (Probably not)

Is this work like a finger in the dike? (Yes)

Can I make it through the physical and psychological demands of three weeks in the field in hot, very crude conditions? (*Inshallah*) (God willing).

My travel permit from HAC (the Sudanese Humanitarian Aid Commission) came through in 2 days. A small miracle.

18 Sept 2010 El Fasher

Flight to El Fasher leaves almost on time (not my experience in the past), and we arrive without incident. The luggage takes about an hour to be offloaded. I always come here with a lot of stuff for the women and leave with my one suitcase. Logistics for getting this stuff moved around can be humorous, since DPDO still does not have a 4WD vehicle promised about 9 months ago by HAC. We make due with a very small car.

The local reservoir is full after a period of downpours but the rainy season is about over. Otherwise it looks like not much has changed. UNICEF guesthouse looks a bit more run-down than in the past. Suliman wanted me to stay here because it is out of the main town area and perhaps more secure. Downside is that it's not close to any shops except a little kiosk that sells bottled water and other odds and ends. It's Saturday so everyone is off but the market is open. We'll run a few errands – more stuff for the women's centers. I'm looking forward to seeing the ladies.

19 Sept 2010 El Fasher

Today was a very good day. I feel back in the groove of what I love about this work – finding collaborators to get things accomplished. There seems to be a shift in focus toward supporting national (Sudanese) organizations. DPDO is registered this way. So our star is rising.

We spent the day meeting with all the UN Agencies with whom we've developed relationships. OCHA/UNJLC agreed to give us 125 *tobes* for the women at Kassab Center. (Zahra, the lady I've photographed for three years running in the same *tobe* will finally have something new to wear!) UNDP is in the final stages of approving our partnership to manage their Rule of Law program, using an office at our Kassab Center for a team of local paralegals who will assist the community with civil/human rights education. And UNICEF came through the school supplies we requested in April. Tomorrow we have a staff meeting to review and improve all our procedures at the Abu Shouk Women's Center.

I'm fairly immune to the usual discomforts of this place, especially the poor sanitation. With no TV and extremely limited Internet access, time has slowed to a more contemplative pace. I have time to observe, to think. I've seen perched eagles and soaring herons, and ibises, and too many magnificent birds I cannot identify. The market is full of oranges and huge watermelons, okra, tomatoes, bitter melon. A riot of smells and unusual commodities -- sandalwood chips, a type of plant used to ease cramps, great bowls of incense and grains -- and the putrid odor of fetid water and garbage in ruts left by trucks. The market seriously needs a civic clean-up day. Plastic bags and crushed plastic bottles are a much worse litter problem than I remember.

20 Sept 2010 El Fasher

Every good day apparently must be balanced by a more difficult one. The smallest thing can throw off a well-planned schedule. Forgetting an electrical adapter, the electricity being out altogether, a battery gone missing. I spend several hours after the day's work is "done" making notes, preparing for the coming day's needs. Another challenge is handling fictitious information -- report of things that should have been done but weren't, or vice versa. I've had small "windows" open to reveal a deeply emotional side of people, a desire for goodness and strength, and sweet gratitude for resources freely given.

21 Sept El Fasher

Wonderful day getting admin procedures straight with the women at Abu Shouk. Lucky we checked in with UNHAS regarding our flight to Kutum. Seems the Khartoum office had forgotten to forward our cargo request. We have about 90 kgs of supplies for the Center. A kind man decided to waive all the administrative hoodoo and approve it on the spot.

22 Sept 2010 El Fasher and Kutum, North Darfur

Power went out in the middle of the night and the room became a hot box. Not much good sleep, and then there was the call to prayer at 5am. Got up at 7am already packed for the trip to Kutum. We arrived at El Fasher airport before the gates opened with our assorted bags and boxes. Passed through baggage inspection, sat around the waiting room for about 45 minutes. Then an announcement: the flight is delayed an hour. We boarded an hour and a half later. (This is unusual for UNHAS; they run a tight operation, despite all the uncertainties of the place.) Flew over the greened-up area northwest of El Fasher. Farmed plains then rugged hills and craggy buttes. The heavy rains this year caused a lot of damage to towns and camps close to the *wadis* (seasonal rivers), including Kutum and Kassab. Due to the lateness of our flight, Ibrahim, our intrepid driver, did not arrive until about 15 minutes after the helicopter and everyone meeting people or stuff had left. An oddly humorous sight – the two of us and our pile of cargo sitting alone in the middle of nowhere.

It was like old home week when Ibrahim arrived. He's such a happy, funny man. He told us (not reassuringly) about his two recent encounters with armed bandits. In one event, he was forced at gunpoint to drive out to a remote spot. The bandits took his truck's wheels and battery and left him. Fortunately, he'd had the presence of mind to hide his cell phone and called for help. Another incident involved him throwing a rock at his captor, who was stopped from beating him half to death by an accomplice. He seems to take this all in stride.

The town is crawling with Sudanese government forces, occasional truckloads of Janjaweed, some of whom like to stroll the streets with their automatic weapons, and UNAMID armored personnel carriers whose occupants seem preoccupied with hitting the local souk or parking to watch the residents go about their business. The *wadi* flooded part of the town, the result being deep muddy ruts and reconfigured roads filled with flood trash. Not pretty. But I like Kutum, a country village with breathtaking views of mountains.

At the UNAMID base, my email-confirmed request for accommodations was not forwarded up the chain of command, so they didn't know we were coming. However an Afrikaner officer fitted us into a Quonset-hut shaped tent on the grounds of the "whitehouse", a miserably maintained former residence that was ceded to UNAMID when they established their base here. Water for showers *might* be available between 4:30am and 7am. Occasionally, but not predictably, for an hour at night. You can imagine how this plays out with flushing toilets. Blessedly, there is not a mirror to be found.

We paid a compulsory visit to the HAC office, but Ihab, the resident HAC official, was not to be found.

Finally, to the women's center where we had a joyful reunion with our ladies. They've planted a thriving community vegetable garden. We began a remodeling project immediately: purchase materials to restore interior walls (*birish*, a woven mat), paint the doors, replace the worn floor mats and the tarps that cover the front and side fences. This is cheaper and more interesting than remodeling project I've ever taken on.

23 Sept, 2010 Kassab camp

Kindly weather if you avoid hanging out in the sun. Cool nights with a star studded firmament. I'm unable to avoid using copious amounts of plastic – both bags and bottles. Bottled water is probably the only kind safe to drink. I saw kids leaving school, rushing down the hill to the now-dry *wadi*. They dig holes in the sand to locate just-below-the surface water, then stick their heads in and suck up the water.

We blitzed the souk, buying up one guy's whole stock of *birish*. The material used to tie these woven panels to frames is called "John Garang" -- strips of tire rubber that are "black and strong," as was the famed charismatic leader of the Southern Sudanese rebel movement – at least until he was killed in a suspicious plane crash several years ago. I was quite taken by the hardware store, a tiny kiosk-type shop with bins of nails and fix-it doodads hanging from the walls. Paint thinner is sold in recycled soda bottles. My favorite vendors in the souk are the guys who sell dried plant products. Great bins full of pungent spices, incense, tea. In all cases, one is expected to haggle over the price.

We seem to have squatters at the women's center. A group of ladies who used to go there when IRC was running the place feel they have a right to return under their own terms. We have to navigate this carefully but firmly – let them know we are inclusive but they have to follow the house rules. (like no fire for tea in the classroom). Still have to meet and pay my respects to the local sheikhs.

We discussed a bunch of concerns with the managers and then began distributing the new *tobes* (from OCHA) and carry bags (Katherine got these as a donation). The women were thrilled to have something new to wear and happy to have a sturdy bag to carry their weaving stuff. Little things make huge happiness – at least for the moment.

An older deaf woman came to hang out during the proceedings. She managed to convey some of her story to Huda (an incredibly adept translator) using the most unique sign language I've ever seen. I was so captivated, I did not think to record it.

We bought a watermelon on the way back to our hovel. Unfortunately it was not particularly sweet. The UNAMID base has changed its rules; visitors are no longer allowed to eat in the mess hall. After seeing the kitchen, that is not a disappointment. There is a sign near the entrance that states a doctor's written permission is required for exemption from eating red meat. We buy what we can at the local shops and have set up a little snack counter in our tent. I have to admit I would give my eyeteeth for an iced mocha.

24 Sept 2010 UNAMID base, Kutum

A big windstorm last night made the sides of the tent heave like a bellows. Various unsecured items crashed about the courtyard. Mosquitoes in active torment mode. (The most egregious error of evolution is that insect). Then a loud long argument between some soldiers on the other side of the wall at around 2am. My alarm went off at 6:30 just as I was hitting REM sleep. Needed a shower and that gave me a half-hour to get one. Lucky it was Friday and everybody has a day off. I have only to spend time with the women for these minor "hardships" to be put into clear perspective. They've been living with much more discomfort for many years.

I spent part of the morning revising and printing admin forms and then walked around the base, talked to some soldiers. The South Africans are unfailingly friendly,

the Egyptians give me the creeps with their stares, their sullen lolling around, cleaning their guns.

There is nothing to do in this town in the way of amusements.

25 Sept 2010 Kutum / Kassab camp

Fatigue has become my constant companion so I have not gotten beyond my admin notes each night before collapsing. This section is a reconstruction of the last few days.

The nights are cooler but filled with insects. Mosquitoes of course, and another flying creature that emerges in clouds to hover around light sources (including computer screens). Despite liberal application of repellent, I have so many bites on my face that I must look scary.

Kutum town is built on rolling hills, and since there is no erosion control, the rainy season tends to rearrange "streets." Many are riven with gullies that prevent motor transport. Ibrahim is ever resourceful about finding detours. Some homes are abandoned due the phenomenon of melting walls. Most residential structures are made of a mud/straw/stone mixture, long baked in the sun. Hard rain erodes them until they become uninhabitable. There seems to be a sort of housing boom in the area between the camp and the town, but it doesn't look like low-income housing. 50-70 percent of the population of the town is displaced people. Many of the former residents have left for El Fasher or Khartoum. All that's left for the new residents in the way of income-producing activities are service jobs (cleaners and guards) and small market stalls.

We've managed to inject a lot of money into the local economy. A painter to repaint the several metal doors in the Center, a carpenter to build shelves for the storage shed, a "wall hanger" (Abdallah) to remove the old *birish* from the interior walls and replace it with new *birish*. He is a skilled craftsman; I like to watch him work his long needles. He also replaced tarps that were hung on the inside of the perimeter wall to provide privacy. The outside of the wall is lined with thorny cut shrubs to discourage trespass. I've been accidentally snagged a couple of times (my clothes, not my skin, thankfully) and these barriers are not to be messed with.

After discussion of some admin forms, we talked with the managers about local health and safety problems. GOAL (an Irish NGO) runs a clinic outside the other end of the camp, but the women are often reluctant to make the long, semi-dangerous trip. The clinic has a new training program for rape case management. The problem remains in preventing attacks. Women have two reasons to leave the camp: for firewood and to look after their tiny farm plots. UNAMID provides armed escorts up to 5 km (about 3 miles) from the camp, but the women have to go farther than that these days to find wood. Some of the women have told me that when they go in groups to their farm plots, they are accosted by roving militia who beat them up. They feel there is no point in reporting these incidents because no one will do anything.

Water is the center of life – finding it, carrying it, using it carefully. It is an essential daily chore, a burdensome one. Water weighs about 8 lbs per gallon. I see women carrying plastic jugs of at least 4-5 gallons. They probably do this several times a day.

Virtually everything is reused – dried palm fronds for building materials, tire rubber for lashing poles, plastic bottles for anything liquid. Unfortunately, the community has not found way to deal with trash. People sweep out their market stalls into the walkways.

Fatihah, one of our managers, gives the weavers instruction like a stern headmistress. I got this on video. She graciously tolerates wisecracks from the women.

26 Sept 2010 Kutum / Kassab camp

We make our compulsory visit to HAC. A man named Ihab, polite, well dressed, from another region of Sudan. His office is on the grounds of a former estate (British) with lovely giant palm trees and a once-glorious garden of flowering shrubs. While he is kind and welcoming (DPDO is the only NGO still active in the camp), I decide to listen and reveal little.

He tells us that there is a prison with 17 or 18 women and their 13 children who are in desperate need of food, clothing and sanitation. Their offense was making a local “moonshine” – one of dwindling enterprises in which they can engage but which is strictly forbidden in this Islamic culture. He wants me to find a way to take care of them (in a *government* prison). He also says the population is in great need of psychological services. Of this, I have no doubt, but also no resources.

We buy a case of notebooks and several boxes of pencils for the literacy class, and make the teacher happy with a new *tobe* and ruler/pointer.

Today we review the basket specs and the women are relieved to learn that my previous emissary gave them the wrong information. They are happily back making what they know best – and are true artisans. The *buno* we brought is a kind of grass that must be hand-split. It has a shiny surface that takes dye well. Another type of grass that is more expensive but usually left in its natural straw color is call *telbun*. The women are growing it at the Center, along with a fabulous crop of watermelons, okra and sorghum. I gave them some flower seeds (from Khartoum) to add to the mix.

Work continues on the interior rehab. The women seem happy with the progress.

Meanwhile, back at the UNAMID base, we endure another miserable night of a noisy generator and insect visitors. I hate using the toilet because that’s where the insects collect. It’s like stepping into a cloud of creepy crawlies. The neighbors have hung laundry in the hall so we have to press through men’s t-shirts and undies to get out of the building. Living like refugees -- with a few minor perks. I’m adding to my stock of cloud photos. We can still laugh. PJ, a young South African soldier who has pulled front gate guard duty this week, has taken a shine to Huda (my translator). He came by to visit, talking up a blue streak about his family and his absent father. Huda and I have developed an excellent working (and living) routine. She is so easy to be around, bright, curious, affable, willing to see the humor in things.

27 Sept 2010 Kutum / Kassab camp

Kutum town is hangout central for a variety of armed men: Chadian rebels, supported by the Govt of Sudan in their effort to topple the Govt of Chad; Darfuri rebels (aka *Tora Bora*) who would like to topple the Govt of Sudan; Sudanese armed forces troops who probably would rather be home, Janajweed who work for the highest bidder, and UNAMID troops who come to "show a presence" and are regarded with disdain by the locals for their inability to ensure security. Lots of different uniforms, headgear, weapons, vehicles. All seems calm, but I'm told any stupid thing could be a match to this bundle of kindling, and I'd prefer not to be around when it happens.

Today we start with a meeting at WFP (World Food Program). They've decided that 7 years of free food aid is enough and are moving toward "barter" programs – Food for Work, Food for Training. This would be fine except people need more than food and I can't run my Center on food. I'm trying to figure out how to take advantage of this opportunity. We ask if they have room for us in their trailer for guests. *Allahu Akbar*, they take us in.

We have a meeting with the adult education teachers in the camp. They need everything – blackboards, pencils, notebooks, textbooks, and classroom furniture. I'm taking some of the Bookwish Foundation's donation that just arrived in Khartoum to support their work. There are 12 teachers including one at our Center; their students are all women. Almost as an afterthought, they asked if there could be some classes for men. They teach year round, 2-hours per day, for the equivalent of about \$20/mo

With the Center's staff, we discuss more training at the Center in first aid, solar cooking and health. Yes, *please* to all. And it's payday, the happiest day of the month. Of course, everyone wants a raise. Our monthly operating expense for this Center right now is around \$5,000. I need regular donations to keep this going.

28 Sept 2010 Kutum / Kassab camp

First thing in the morning, we drop off our belongings at WFP. The modular guest unit – like a trailer - has AC and two comfortable beds and, miracle of miracles, a working DSL cable. And a clean shower and a working kitchen. Like heaven after the little hell at the UNAMID base.

Today we meet with the women's crafts (crocheting) and noodle-making group. They want space at the Center. The discussion turns contentious when we place the condition that they observe the Center rules and management. They claim it is their Center and they should be able to use it however they like. No resolution. We agree to meet on Thursday. Meanwhile, we are checking whether our staff in El Fasher concluded a *written* agreement with the sheikhs for "ownership" of the Center; it appears we have none and are now on shaky ground. I'm pissed. My manager Fatiah is in tears since there were some personal attacks on her. My other manager Aisha is chanting "*malesh, malesh*" (Sorry, sorry). We make ourselves feel better by going back to the business of the day – purchasing the baskets that were made in the last month. Some are astonishingly beautiful. 6 of us engaged in quality control, tagging, recording, paying. Great teamwork. The weavers are SO happy to be paid. I love these women.

A good night's sleep – but not enough. We are working 12-hour days in the heat -- and it's *hot*. Our first news of the outside world on BBC on WFP's TV. It's been a long time since I've watched a TV with a vertical roll.

29 Sept 2010 Kutum / Kassab camp

We handled a few more admin procedures and discussed how the 6 rooms in the main building of the center will be used, and what signs that need to be posted. Three of the men began assembling a *rakova* (like an awning on stilts, framed with branches and covered with birish) for the kitchen area where the women make tea and dye the basket material.

The Center is not open today to allow the women time for other household chores. Only two of the managers (Fatiah and Aisha), the new program coordinator Abdeltaif, Abdallah the guard and the wall-hanging guy are here. The mood is relaxed. We chat about their lives. Aisha, the mother of 8 children, one of whom died, was married at 14. She told us about the time her village was burnt to the ground and the Janjaweed murdered 26 people. She and many others took refuge near the Kutum *wadi* with virtually no food or shelter. She had just delivered a baby. They were stuck there for 5 months. Most of the older people died of disease and exposure. An aid agency came to provide tarps, blankets and food. That was the genesis of Kassab camp, which is now a small "town" with no durable infrastructure. I asked her how she managed to survive. She choked up and said she couldn't talk about it anymore – that she puts that time away from her thoughts and just goes on with life.

I found myself carefully bandaging her cut toe with some lime-green band-aids donated by my friend Danielle. This was the way she allowed me to care for her.

She and Fatiah prepared a lovely lunch of salad and *asida* and some sort of boney meat (which I tend to avoid). For a little while, we were enjoying a relaxed time together, teasing and laughing as if we weren't in the middle of a godforsaken camp in a destitute country. These people are perhaps the greatest survivalists on the planet. They deserve much more help than they get.

30 Sept 2010 Kutum

Today we meet the three head sheikhs of the camp – or so we thought. It was to be a courtesy call to acknowledge their leadership, thank them for their support, and inquire about initiatives they are supporting in the camp. It turned into a meeting of over thirty people including the Shabaab (youth) and women leaders. They wanted to discuss only the beef about "rights" to the Women's Center.

The splinter group claimed the Center was stolen from them after IRC left two years ago. The sheiks and the youth recall a discussion about allowing DPDO to use the space, but it was not committed to writing. The women became increasingly agitated and began demanding that the Center be split in half between the DPDO contingent and them, that we renovate the old Center next door or build them a new *rakova* in the current Center. They demand use of storage space. The sheikhs offer support for some ideas, withdraw it for others, seem to switch sides. The arguments get

intense. After about three hours in the heat, I excuse myself and go find a private place to weep.

When I return, I do not sit. I want to leave. The tide goes back and forth another half our or so. Finally I'm allowed to speak. I tell them I have come a very long way, and worked very hard to improve the Center, that I'm shocked and disappointed by the in-fighting among the women. If we cannot reach a workable agreement that DPDO manage the Center and that everyone follow the reasonable rules we set, then I'm prepared to pull DPDO from the camp entirely. (Bluff) I set out two pieces of paper with a sheet of carbon paper between and request that the terms be met with a written agreement.

Another half hour of debate ensues, with the sheikhs admitting that they should have consulted the women before committing to DPDO, but since DPDO is the only NGO working with women in the camp, it would be stupid to compromise DPDO's authority to run the center.

We offer the dissident women the use of two rooms in the Center and one small area for storage. They are required to follow DPDO's rules and respect the managers' authority to make decisions. I told them I seek cooperation among sisters. The deal is done, an agreement duly written on one page and signed by about 10 people with rank in the various organizations.

4 HOURS of talking. I'm told this is a relatively short period for a conclusive meeting in Darfur. Everyone seems happy and relieved, including our managers who had argued privately just to let the "interlopers" have the Center or there would be no end of hassle. But as you may know, I am stubborn when I believe in what I am doing. I thank the sheikhs for their help and wisdom (and truly they were in fine form), and later Fatiah gives them each an *ima* (a long white cloth that is wrapped like a turban) and soap (always in short supply) that I brought as tokens of respect. The Center is secured for the future and my managers are restored to their authority. It was intense, quite satisfying and entirely exhausting.

The needs here are so profound that it's hard for me to imagine we are all on the same planet.

1 October 2010 Kutum

It's Friday, the day off, but we have a meeting schedule with the UNAMID commander who, as it turned out, had not returned from his trip to El Fasher. Just as well. We get some extra sleep. Then a social call to Suliman's mom who lives nearby. *Haboba* (grandmother) is a delightfully funny 70-something woman who spent most of our visit preparing and serving drinks and food, despite our entreaty to sit and talk.

Her home is a walled compound with several buildings, a guava and lemon tree in the courtyard where baby chicks have the run of the place, a panoramic view of the nearby mountains and lots of extended family members coming and going. The front room is a combination bedroom and dining room, with two single beds, a large sideboard filled with dishes, a refrigerator and a couple of chairs. The windows are covered with sections of what looks like sacks used for food aid. There are four photos of Suliman high up on the wall.

There's a decent breeze to break the heat. When we first arrive she sets several glasses on a tray to fetch water, but her *tobe* catches on the bedpost and the glasses shatter on the cement floor. After the clean up, she brings us a pitcher of Tang. When I step back to move a table in place, I knock over a plastic pitcher of water. No clean up needed as the floor is cement and "it will dry". Huda teases me that I've become a klutz, and in truth, when I am tired, I do some klutzy things. Off goes *haboba* to select a chicken for slaughter. This task is left to a teenage grandson. We hear the chicken's clucking protest, then silence and end up discussing the *halal* method of slaughter. Here it's quite reverent – preceded by prayers for forgiveness for taking a life and a quick death with a very sharp knife.

Haboba stops at one point to bring a pillow and tells me to take a rest on the bed. She tells the story of her return to Kutum from El Fasher on a bus during the recent heavy rains. Seems they were stranded by road washouts for about 5 days. She got malaria and spent 9 days in the hospital. During our visit last year, she regaled us with the hilarious story of her return trip from the US, full of her feisty navigation through international airports in her *tobe*, pointing out to baffled airline personnel – in Arabic – that she was not stupid, just lost, and no she would not eat the airport food. She's known locally as the "woman who went to America." Almost everybody I meet would like to come to America – and wouldn't they be amazed by our abundance of everything.

Off she goes to tend her fire. A while later, she and Huda bring a large tray with roasted chicken, sweet rice and *asida*. I am grateful for all food that is fully and tastefully cooked. We leave before dark. The power is off at the WFP compound so we have to leave the door open to make the stuffy trailer tolerable. This allowed numerous bugs free access; we were tormented most of the night by those odd flying insects that swarmed the UNAMID compound. But I sleep enough to dream and it's a revelatory one.

2 October 2010 Kutum and Kassab

Our last full work day here. I've come to understand that there's an art form to forms. We have a lot of data to track with 15 staff, over 300 weavers, and two offices to run. The challenges for me: to reverse the text direction (Arabic is read right to left) of charts, to minimize the number while maximizing the information efficiency of forms, and to keep the information in the same order every time. Arabic has a different alphabet than English, so I go with the needs of the primary users (Arabic) and deal with translation to English at the DC office. I also know that forms need to be updated as the character of the work changes. Huda's been great about translating, but my Mac computer does something strange with Arabic text that I have yet to figure out how to correct. However, I believe I've gotten the important forms reworked with our Kassab team.

We have a morning meeting with the paralegals from UNDP to discuss facilitating their Rule of Law program through our Center. The head paralegal is the same woman, Hiba, who had been driving the dispute about control of the Center. A couple of sheikhs also come. I welcome them and start by telling them my dream from the previous night. In the dream, a friend and I move to a large estate or compound. My friend plants a fabulous garden with many nifty pots of blooms and beds of flowers and vegetables. Problem is, she has left no room for *my* garden. I tell them this dream enabled me to understand their feelings of being left out. I said I was deeply sorry for our misunderstanding and wanted to move forward with

cooperation and respect. I sensed the moment when they let their resistance evaporate. Suliman likes to remind me that what Darfuris need most is to be *seen and acknowledged*.

For the past year, UNDP (United Nations Development Program) has trained a group of women as paralegals in several camps. They learned Sudanese law, human rights law, child and family law, laws that apply to sexual violence, and mediation and group process. UNDP has asked DPDO to act in a supervisory capacity with regards to paying and managing the paralegals. This proposal has been in the works for about 6 months. From the beginning, I had wanted to include many of these elements in the Center's activities. This partnership gives us that opportunity - but I know it won't be easy. We have to meet with the head of the program in El Fasher to conclude the details. I feel confident of my new Program Coordinator's ability to solve problems; this additional assignment will really make him stretch.

Huda and I have come up with an idea for a co-authored book called *Khawaja OK!*, a humorous meditation on our two perspectives of Darfur – she as a native and me as an outsider. Driving through Kassab, I'm frequently regaled by children's cries of "Khawaja OK!" with a thumbs-up sign. They come racing out of alleyways whenever they hear the truck. Sometimes they run dangerously close to try to touch my arm or hand. (My 15 minutes of fame!) This behavior evidently has something to do not only with the current rarity of white people in the camp but also with the fact that for many years, Westerners drove relief and recovery efforts. But, in my whole time in Kassab and Kutum, I have seen only Africans.

Slowly over the past couple of years, the government has reduced the population to a desperate level of survival. The difficulty of acquiring even the simplest things – a pencil, a notepad, a copy of a document, a cup of clean water, a band-aid or aspirin – still shocks me. Electricity, navigable roads, public transit and garbage collection do not exist. It's a very long hot walk from Kutum town to Kassab camp; many people make the trek daily, often with heavy loads.

Most camp people cannot afford to buy the abundant citrus (grapefruit, oranges and a tasty hybrid of the two) trucked here from Jebel Mara, a famously productive region to the south where fighting has occurred intermittently for many months. Of course we bought a few large bags to divvy among the ladies at the Center. Most women have no opportunities to earn income and depend on food aid (wheat, sorghum, oil, lentils and salt). In a sugar-producing, sugar-loving nation, the price of the commodity has increased dramatically in recent months, but I haven't yet figured the unit of measure (ruttles) is on a 175 SDG (about \$70) sack of sugar.

Many people have cell phones; it cost the equivalent of 40 cents every time they want to charge up using a generator acquired by a clever entrepreneur.

My driver Ibrahim likes to play the music of his tribe (Fur) on his cell phone. One revered singer is Marian Amoh. "Amoh" has become the complimentary term for a righteous strong woman.

I believe the strong tradition of community leaders has helped carry the Darfuris. There are both men and women sheikhs; they tend to be wise, thoughtful people who spend all their time resolving conflicts and holding things together. I wonder how long these human beings must wait – no, *endure* – such hardship before their

lives are restored to something resembling prosperity. Of course, some of them have already gone crazy or numb or malnourished beyond redemption.

Storm clouds are massing and we still have a stop to make at the local Adult Ed centers for a look-see. We have a quick lunch of chopped salad and *fagoose* (a fat-cucumber-like vegetable). We put away the floor mats and cooking utensils just before the cloudburst. It's a drenching rain, cleaning the dust from the air and perking up all the little plots of vegetables.

Though the rain had stopped, it is still darkly cloudy when we set out for the training centers not far away. God bless teachers! These guys are working in sturdy enough tents but have NO supplies of any kind except a few ancient blackboards. The tents are dark (Lorraine – we need your solar lamps!) and there is not much to recommend them as learning environments. Luckily, we just got a bunch of school supplies from Bookwish and UNICEF. Here are a few more people to whom we can offer a bit of hope.

Aisha and Fatiah and I have an emotional goodbye. Lots of rocking hugs and whispers of "I love you" (*bahebig*, in Arabic). We are holding each other in our hearts. Family bonds grow in the most unusual ways and places.

3 October 2010 Kutum to el Fasher

WFP flies their helicopter between El Fasher and Kutum only on Wednesdays and Sundays. The departure times vary due to side trips to other remote towns to deliver people or stuff. We're told that we should expect to fly around 3pm. At about 1:30, the head of the office routs us out of our trailer. We're already packed, Ibrahim is nearby. We follow the WFP van to the airstrip. As we approach, we see the chopper taking off. I panic for a moment that we've missed our ride (CAN'T do three more days here!), but the van continues and we park at the usual spot beside what passes for a landing site. We're told the flight needed to dash over to Hashaba camp and will return shortly.

Ibrahim and I have developed a sort of brother-sister teasing relationship. I see that he is sad to end our 11 days of adventure together – as am I. I love his rattling 30-year-old Toyota with just about every part taped or wired together, and the way he skillfully maneuvers over terrain that would scare the bejesus out of most drivers. He knew where to find everyone and everything we needed. We had a great meal at this house with his 8 kids and wife. He and I hug goodbye and, in the usual tradition, shake hands.

Despite my considerable attachment to this place, I'm unnaturally relieved when I see the chopper approaching. The crew loads our bags – my dirty duffel and suitcase and Huda's cute *hot pink* carry bag - through the front door. This is unusual. We are the only passengers. The co-pilot opens two porthole windows to give us some ventilation. The pilot is a Russian or Serb with a big mustache and a loud voice, brash and funny. The half-hour flight offers time to meditate on the starkly beautiful granite outcroppings, places where it's possible no human foot has ever set. The rough hills support a tracery of gullies and ravines studded with trees. In a few months, the sun will banish most of the green from this land.

It's hotter in El Fasher. A couple of tanks are parked on one of the main roads. Seems a demonstration was planned over a devastating Ponzi scheme that sucked a lot of assets out of the community a few months ago. Nobody knows where the money went, but I'm sure it left the country or is being well laundered. President Bashir gave his troops instructions to "shoot to kill" -- so nobody showed up for the "riot", as a demonstration seems to be called here.

Hungry as hell, we head straight to the Turks' restaurant for a big fat meal. Then I'm back at the UNICEF guesthouse with a suitcase of filthy clothes, a duffle bag full of exquisite baskets, the AC full blast, and a whole list of stuff to do before I can go home.

4 October 2010 – El Fasher

Now I remember why I dislike El Fasher. There is sullenness about the place, an uneasy resignation to filth and disorder.

I'm have to scale back the Abu Shouk Center staff and activities, not only because they can't seem to take direction on managing the work, but because I want to devote our limited resources to Kassab. I believe in playing to one's strength.

The only UN Agency I don't feel slippery-sliddy with is UNDP. I understand what they are aiming to do and I like the people in charge. Everyone else seems to speak in a rarified dialect: "whatever we can do to help" – after one jumps through all the flaming hoops.

Our El Fasher office is in a neighborhood with chronic power outages. It gets stifling hot and we can't use laptops for long or the printer. The generator is a pig for fuel and high maintenance. I felt reassured when the power went out at the UNICEF offices today. This electrical malaise seems to hit everyone, but some less seriously.

After another 5-month effort, we got the runt of supplies left in the UNICEF warehouse for our schools. Enough to make a slight dent in every school's abiding lack of resources. The stuff is packaged in Denmark and sent at enormous shipping cost to a place where most items could be acquired in the local market. The boxes are large and seem sturdy enough, but the first one we take off the stack collapses at one end, emptying everything onto the floor.

The "Classroom kits" are packed with about 6 dozen notebooks, a couple of monster rulers that teachers use as pointers, a couple dozen paper boxes of red and blue Bic pens, and two heavy boxes of chalk that tend to crush everything else. So we got gazillion pieces of chalk, no blackboards, pens instead of preferred pencils - and enough red ones to supply all the non-existent teachers for about a decade. Most of the boxes are broken at the corners so the pens are falling out.

Far be it from me to look a gift horse in the mouth, but I want to know who dreamed up this selection of items and packaging scheme. The logistics of delivery are complicated enough. This in-kind donation creates another burden on our team: either handle broken boxes leaking pens and bent notebooks or repack the supplies in better cartons (harder to find in El Fasher than a good restaurant).

I'm so ready to leave.

5 October 2010 – El Fasher

Death is a frequent visitor here. I saw a number of walking funeral processions in Kutum and, since I arrived in El Fasher, there have been two deaths among the circle of people I know.

The Muslim ritual involves bathing and wrapping the body in a white cloth. The body is buried the day of death without a coffin. Every death ripples through a large extended family. People flood the house of the deceased family to sit and pray and eat. Whenever I see a gathering of men in *jellabiyas* (long white robes), I figure the event is either a funeral or a food distribution.

More old people grace the streets than one would expect from the official life expectancy of 47. Elders are generally treated with deference and respect – except by anyone driving a vehicle.

Wandering goats show up wherever they please, often in the road. The traffic mix includes horse- and donkey-drawn carts loaded with water tanks or building materials. There are no traffic signals or street signs. Gaping ruts are substantial blights on the mostly unpaved roads, often provoking drivers to detour into oncoming traffic.

I had occasion to travel through a new part of town. Garbage heaped randomly among cannibalized, rusting vehicles. Trash-fouled mini-lakes. Noxious odors. Dust in the air. I do not know how people survive in this dismal environment or, for that matter, why they do not clean it up. When I broach the subject in a constructive sort of way (clean-up squads for pay, recycling plastic as a business, etc), most people find the notion laughable. In time, this will change.

Did I mention the plague of locusts that visits in the night? For real.

8-12 October - Khartoum

Driving around Khartoum, I see such a discordant city. Grand ministry buildings arrayed along the Nile, messy poverty almost everywhere else. The International Airport is located in the *center* of the city, flanked by relatively well-to-do neighborhoods. A favorite exterior paint color is a coral orange, with pea-green and industrial blue following closely. Everything looks sand-scoured, decrepit.

Industrial areas lay to the city's south with trucks parked along some roads for an open-air market of brick or other building materials; great tracts of land are covered with heaped construction landfill next to mounds of trash. Garbage-clotted ditches sluice heavy metal waste from local weapons factories through residential areas. The "suburbs" seem to grow in fits; some buildings have a storey or two finished before the builder/owner evidently gives up on construction, leaving exposed columns of rebar, and leases out the lower floor(s). Pity the tenants if there is ever a move to finish the building. Some of the half-completed buildings work well for displaced people, squatters with makeshift kitchens, bedrooms, and laundry hanging within the wall-less structure.

Huda says that Khartoum has too many tea ladies, pharmacies and beauty parlors. The tea ladies are women of various ages who set up tiny cardboard stands with a couple of plastic stools where passersby can sit for a quick glass of tea for the equivalent of 20-40 cents. The government sends tax collectors around to extract up to 25% of their earnings; if they refuse, the collectors can smash up their puny assets and banish them from the neighborhood. The government taxes every business with no observable benefit to the payers.

The pharmacies dispense whatever medicines they can get. Often they serve as the "prescribing doctor" for a wide range of ailments for which ordinary folks cannot afford to see an MD. The fallback is traditional herbal cures, some that work. If you should find yourself in need of emergency care, the hospital will charge 300 SDG (about \$120) just to let you in. No money, no service. Of course, most people do not make this much income in 4 months. God help you if you have psychological issues or a disability.

The beauty parlors – I don't know about this. I do see too many young women bleaching their skin. The effect is uniformly ghastly: unnaturally tightened (dried) skin the color of a day-old cadaver. This insidious standard of beauty betrays the glorious range of natural skin tones. Insouciance rules among young women.

My white hair and pale skin seem to terrify young children, much to my chagrin.

The government buys demonstrators when it wishes to broadcast a message of civilian solidarity with official agendas.

The vast *souk* in Omdurman (the sister city northwest of Khartoum) offers virtually anything one could be looking for – shoes, fabrics, appliances, food, clothing, and jewelry. It offers a fertile field for pickpockets. Someone skillfully sliced my pants below the pocket in the front, but came up empty handed.

Nearby are flea markets with odds and ends of dated, rickety furniture, boxed electronics (possibly functional), and miscellaneous junk.

I did not notice one phenomenon before, but now it is epidemic: people (mostly young men) weaving among stopped traffic to sell all sort of stuff – plastic cups, fruit, water, boxes of tissue, and a number of unidentifiable do-dads, probably made in China, perhaps fallen off a truck New Jersey style. Beggars of all ages are everywhere. The way to refuse an entreaty (some are extremely persistent, especially if they have a deformity to show) is to say "Allah karim" (God is kind). The kids trouble my heart the most.

More restaurants are attempting to provide Western fare – burgers, wings, wraps – but the concepts are sadly lost in translation. Often orders for a table of 5 are delivered one at a time over a 15-minute period. Pepsi and Sprite are freely available but I prefer the fruit juices (guava, orange and mango) that are canned locally or at least regionally.

There is a "Today" style show, with decent photo essays, but the anchors read the news from (visible) newspapers and sometimes from laptops, the screens of which are shown in case you want to read along. Some women anchors wear Western style suits along with a headscarf. A real fashion disconnect. *Tobes* look so much better.

People in transit sleep with newspapers, hats or blankets over their heads. They sleep folded up as if consigned to their suitcase, or sprawled, slack-jawed, snoring, or bundled in fetal position under a blanket or jacket. Some look vulnerable. Some actually appear in restful repose. I've not mastered this art of sleeping in transit.

I absorbed a lot of details, living in the travel lane. Perhaps these pieces are embedded in corners of my memory to be later illuminated. For now, I've grown tired of relating to this patiently dying place.

It may be possible for a Westerner to live comfortably here but I would not wish it for myself. Security generally entails a kind of isolation from the Sudanese.

Until a government (not the current one, a travesty) understands how to work *for* the people of this country, the misery of the majority will continue. To me, it's an unspeakable waste of human potential.

I understand the "power of one," the idea of a world not born until one arrives. I/we can offer hope, buttressed by the provision of simple but hard-to-get resources like learning materials, structure in the midst of chaos, recognition of personhood, small treats, a secure environment. These "basics" are necessary for launch into bigger dreams.

I/We are improving the potentialities of the women's circumstances. I've made a promise to them. I need help to keep coming through for them.

In next six months there will be wrenching changes; I fear these will make life worse, if that is possible, for so many. But we have a toehold with an important group of survivors, and support them is what we *can* do.

Susan Burgess-Lent
Program Director
22 October 2010